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# Citizen-activist as journalist: Network journalism and professional practices in the coverage of the Aleppo offensive

Jenny Hauser

## **Abstract**

The global news flow of the Syrian conflict has been characterised by citizen journalism since its outset. In the absence of professional journalists on the ground, collaborative newsgathering with citizen activists has posed challenges for newsrooms seeking to align this practice with professional norms and values in journalism. This research investigates the sourcing of news content from the Aleppo offensive in November 2016. Quantitative content analysis and textual analysis of news texts by BBC World Service, France 24 English and Al Jazeera English examines how professional sourcing routines were adapted to a news context dominated by citizen activists and how these sources were framed as authoritative.

## **Introduction**

Few news events have seen media activists and citizen journalists relied on by the mainstream news media to the extent seen in the Syrian conflict. Since its outset in 2011, large amounts of multimedia material and other information found in international news coverage originated from networks of citizen activists and fighters, who shared eyewitness material and updates via social media platforms (Wall and el-Zehad 2014). As Reporters Without Borders called

it the deadliest conflict for journalists, the Syrian war was characterised by a notable lack of professional journalists on the ground. By March 2017, the NGO recorded 211 journalists and citizen journalists killed since the start of the war (Reporters Without Borders 2017). Analysis of news texts by BBC World Service, France 24 English and Al Jazeera English in November 2016 examined how professional journalism negotiated the reliance on amateur journalist sources with the requirements of professional routines.

Eastern districts of Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, had been under rebel-control since 2012. In the summer of 2016 the Syrian Army and its allied groups launched a major offensive to cut off supply routes and regain control of the areas. On November 15, a one-month moratorium on Russian air strikes in northwestern Syria came to an end and a major air and ground offensive resumed to retake all of Aleppo from an alliance of armed opposition fighters within a month. In mid-November an estimated 250,000 people continued to live in the east of the city with the vast majority of information emerging from rebel-held areas originating from a little more than a dozen citizen activist and rebel sources. In the almost complete absence of professional journalists on the ground, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were used extensively to distribute high-quality multimedia material and breaking news updates from within eastern Aleppo. This research analysed social media-sourced news content identified in the online news texts by the three named news organisations. The period investigated spanned eight days from November 15 to 22, covering the resumption of fighting in Aleppo after a period of relative calm. During this time air raids by the Syrian Army made headlines on an almost daily basis. News coverage was dominated by reports of hospitals targeted across eastern Aleppo, which prompted the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2016) to condemn the air strikes.

### **Framework**

Interactive 'produsing' (Bruns, 2006), spurred on by widespread access to social media platforms, has led to the emergence of collaboration as journalistic convention (Hujanen 2016). This new news discourse sees collaboration between professional journalists and amateurs integrated into the culture and ethics of journalism production. The role of the professional journalist is to manage this

interaction. 'Even though the logic of control changes, discursive demarcation between the values and practice of professional journalism and social media are reconstructed. What separates the two sides are the values and the ethical code of professional journalists.' (Hujanen 2016: 878) With the professionalization of journalism in the early part of the 20th Century (Christians 2009), reporting began to be seen as a quasi-scientific pursuit with well-defined techniques and methods, deemed to arrive at a truthful and comprehensive version of events. The claim to objective reporting, for example, illustrates the desire to legitimize journalism in a scientific manner. It was not the journalist who was required to be objective but rather the aim was to apply objective methods to reporting (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007: 88) that could arrive at impartial news coverage.

Before the widespread availability of the Internet, analysis of professional practices laid bare how power elites were structurally empowered to set and frame news agendas. The definition of 'primary' and 'secondary definers' (Hall et al. 1978) provides the framework for this research and is used to explore how journalism practices have changed or stayed the same in the era of networked journalism. Hall et al argue that professional ideology and routines 'give rise to the practice of ensuring that media statements are, wherever possible, grounded in "objective" and "authoritative" statements from "accredited" sources. This means constantly turning to accredited representatives of major social institutions ' (1978: 58) While some of these sources are used as they are deemed representative of sections of the public, others – specifically the 'expert' – are granted accreditation, and therefore importance, precisely because they represent no one. The value of these sources lies in their knowledgability combined with the perception of a personal disinterest in the information and views they provide.

These two aspects of news production – the practical pressures of constantly working against the clock and the professional demands of impartiality and objectivity – combine to produce a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions. The media thus tend, faithfully and impartially, to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order. (1978: 58)

These sources are referred to as 'primary definers' of news events. Although they may have competing interests that are expressed through the mass media,

it is them that define the news agenda and compete for the ability to frame it. In relation to these primary definers, the news media are 'secondary definers', mainly facilitating primary definers' access to a mass audience. As such primary definers are in a dominant position, not only in relation to other less elite sources, but also in their relationship with secondary definers (Negrine 1994). Private citizens are typically the least likely to shape or frame the news agenda as sources (Reich 2015).

Referencing 'primary' and 'secondary' definers, the research investigates the framing of activists and citizen journalists as sources and producers of news content. It analyses what position they took in news texts and how powerful they were compared to the types of sources that traditionally occupied these roles. The first research question for the current study is, then: What source power did citizen-activists have in framing news coverage through their use of social media?

Bowman and Willis (2003: 9) describe citizen journalism as 'the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information.' Therefore, citizen journalism is not only performed in a private capacity but intended to reach a public audience. What sets it apart from professional journalism is its origins in a personal or collective cause, suggesting an activist dimension. Amateurism is oftentimes mentioned alongside citizen journalism (Allen, 2013; Johnson and John, 2015; Schmieder, 2015) as a defining characteristic. Stebbins' (1977) work on the 'modern amateur' ties this individual into a professional-amateur-public system. The amateur is guided by professional norms, skills and techniques, that they try to acquire without necessarily aiming to become a professional. '[A] special member of the public, knows better than the run-of-the-mill member what constitutes a creditable performance or product.' (1977: 587). However, unlike the professional, they do not receive the majority of their income from this pursuit. As is the case with the professional, however, the amateur also aims to serve the public rather than just themselves.

The second research question is based on the convention of collaboration and the role that the professional journalist takes in working with the amateur. It examines what role traditional notions of professionalism in journalism, such as impartiality, had in how collaboration is managed and framed when working

with sources that did not subscribe to a professional code of ethics. Thus the second research question is: How did the news organisations legitimise their collaboration with citizen activists?

## Methodology

The sample of online news texts containing social media sourced content was selected through searches of the news organisations' websites and Twitter accounts using the keywords 'Aleppo' and 'Syria'. Of all the returned search results only news texts relating to the Battle for Aleppo were examined for social media-sourced content. News texts without identifiable social media-sourced content were disregarded. Quantitative content analysis determined the 'source power' of social media users by investigating the number of times a user was cited throughout the texts. A user's source power was measured by how frequently they were relied on for information by the news organisations and whether they were able to enter the mainstream news flow through more than one of the news organisations. This means the number of times each social media source was used in the news texts by one news organisation was logged. In addition, the occurrence of each source was cross referenced with the news texts by all three news organisations to determine if it was present in the coverage of more than one news organisation. These findings were presented in Table 1, which lists the sources found across the coverage of more than one of the news organisations and how often they were referenced, and Table 2, which lists the sources found in the coverage of only one of the the news outlets and how many times they were referenced. The Lasswell model, developed to study propaganda messages in the two world wars, is best summed up as '*who says what to whom via what channel with what effect*' (Neuendorf 2002: 34). By categorizing and empirically recording the sources of social media content, the frequency of their use and the type of messages they provide, it is possible to define primary agents. The aim of the quantitative analysis was to identify the social media users with the greatest ability to access traditional news media through their social media activity.

Discourse analysis was used to explore the second research question. It considers the framing of activists and citizen-journalists' news content, their identity and the relationships established between them, other sources and

professional journalism to examine their influence on shaping the news texts. Norman Fairclough argues discourse analysis' 'useful working assumption is that any part of any text ... will be simultaneously representing [the world], setting up identities, and setting up relations' (Fairclough 1995:55) This research examined how the involvement of citizen-journalists or activists in news production was presented within the framework of professional journalistic practice. Moreover, it examined how the new journalistic convention described by Hujanen (2016) was put into practice in this instance. According to Hujanen, collaboration is incorporated as a journalistic strategy that is presented as requiring effective management by professionals. This suggests that one of the roles of the professional journalists in this interaction is to safeguard the discourse of professionalism in journalism per se.

## Findings

Over the 8 days studied, Al Jazeera produced 19 news texts about Aleppo of which 15 contained multimedia material, photographs and text originating on social media. France 24 published 23 news texts of which 14 contained social media-sourced content. The BBC produced 11 news pieces, all of which contained some social media-sourced content. The prominence of social media-sourced content in the coverage throughout the period shows the extensive reliance on amateur and citizen-journalists, who were often but not always described as 'activists' by the news organisations. The vast majority of social media sources were therefore framed as having civic qualities.

Social media sources were not always attributed or identified in the news texts by their name although it was clear in most cases what type of user they were. Sixteen different sources could be identified in the BBC coverage, which in total provided information or multimedia material 35 times. In addition there were 14 references to sources that could not be identified. This is not to say that there were an additional 14 sources as some of these, or even all, may have been the same as those that were identified and attributed in the news texts. Al Jazeera referenced 15 identified social media sources a total of 67 times. A further 19 references were made to unattributed sources. France 24 sourced content from a total of 18 sources 49 times with no references to unidentified sources.

	<b>BBC</b>	<b>F24</b>	<b>AJ</b>
<i>Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)</i> – citizen activist documenting number of casualties and reports of fighting through network of activists on the grounds	6	20	19
<i>White Helmets in Aleppo</i> – network of search and rescue volunteers in opposition-held areas of Syria	6	5	15
<i>Aleppo Media Center (AMC)</i> – pro-opposition media activists	3	3	6
<i>HNN</i> – pro-opposition media activists	4	2	2
<i>Thqa</i> – pro-opposition media activists	2	2	3
<i>Independent Doctors Association (IDA)</i> – medics in opposition-held Aleppo	3	1	2
<i>SMART</i> – pro-opposition activists reporting through network from across Syria	1	3	
<i>Ibrahim Abu al-Laith</i> – White Helmets spokesman		1	3
<i>Local Coordination Committee (LCC)</i> – Syrian network of	2		1



anti-Assad activists			
<i>Russian Ministry of Defence</i>		2	1
<i>Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)</i> – Syrian state media		1	2
<i>STEP</i> – pro-opposition activists reporting through network from across Syria	1	1	
<i>Fatemah Alabed</i> – citizens in opposition-held Aleppo reporting on events through Twitter	1		1

Table 1. Sources found in news texts of more than one news organization

<b>BBC</b>	<b>France 24</b>	<b>Al Jazeera</b>
Unknown pro-opposition activists and citizen journalists 14	<i>Jabhat Fateh al-Sham</i> opposition fighters 2	Other unidentified pro-opposition activist 15
<i>THA</i> – pro-opposition media activists 1	<i>Modar Shekho</i> – nurse in Aleppo 1	<i>@AlabedBana</i> – young girl living in Aleppo 6
<i>SHAM Front</i> – opposition fighters 1	<i>Syrian Democratic Forces</i> – opposition fighters 1	Pro-government activist footage 2
<i>Basel Ibrahim</i> – pro-opposition media activist 1	<i>@UNReliefChief</i> – United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator 1	<i>Syrian Army</i> – Syrian armed forces 2
<i>Seraj Aldeen AlOmar</i> pro-opposition media activist	<i>Milad Shahabi</i> pro-opposition media activist	<i>Boffle Spoffel</i> – citizen 1

1	1	
<i>Ahmed Hashisho</i> – Pro-opposition media activists <i>Al Buraq Media</i> 1		Pro-Assad militia 1
<i>Basem Ayyoubi</i> pro-opposition media activist 1		<i>Free Syrian Army</i> – opposition fighters 1
		Unidentified ‘health’ official cited 1

Table 2. Sources found in news texts of only one news organisation

Quantitatively, the greatest source power was found among sources that were clearly sympathetic towards opposition fighters in eastern Aleppo. Given the difficulty in access to the rebel-controlled areas this is unsurprising. Table 1 shows 6 sources were successful in gaining entry to the mainstream news flow through the BBC, France 24 and Al Jazeera. They comprised about a third of each organisation’s attributed sources, showing the dominance of a small group of citizen-journalists. However, cited most regularly by a considerable margin was the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), which was mainly run by a Syrian citizen-journalist based in the UK. He recorded death tolls and locations of fighting and air raids.

In press interviews he described the information as gathered through a network of activists across Syria (BBC, 2011; MacFarquhar, 2013).

Profiling the group in the early days of the conflict in 2011, the BBC described it as follows:

It now has more than 200 members and affiliates, covering every province in Syria, with some volunteers aggregating and publicising information from the UK.

Those in Syria work to confirm casualty reports of people that have come from activists or been cited in the media, checking with family members, witnesses or medics on the ground.

As foreign journalists are unable to operate freely in Syria to verify reports themselves, the media are increasingly reliant on such information.

The group says it is impartial in its reporting, recording the deaths of soldiers as well as civilians and protesters. (BBC, 2011)

The SOHR took on a prominent role in the news coverage as a source that had adopted journalistic norms and values, especially with regards to impartiality and accuracy. As such it was seen as carrying out acts of journalism instead of citizen activism, the latter of which, through its partisan nature, presents a greater barrier to entry into the mainstream news flow. Frequently, it was referred to not as 'activist' but as 'monitor' across all three news organisations, implying a detached and disinterested character. The second most powerful source were the White Helmets. The group also presents itself as an impartial and neutral civil society group but on its website also states that it only operates in areas outside of Syrian government control (White Helmets, 2017). While the news coverage often referred to anti-regime citizen journalists as activists, the White Helmets were also referred to by the neutral term 'medics' which, at least to a western audience, dissociates it from a partisan cause. Both SOHR and the White Helmets were therefore partly legitimised through the values of independence and disinterest also found in professional journalism.

In an effort to break down the barrier to mainstream news flows, citizen-journalists in Syria were eager to adopt journalistic norms (Yousuf and Taylor, 2016). The White Helmets published high quality videos, images and updates from Syria's different provinces across multiple social media platforms. In addition to its main social media accounts that published content gathered through its members across the country, there was a second tier of social media accounts designated to specific regions that shared content only from these areas. Local social media accounts from Aleppo published content only originating from there. This operation resembled a centralised media network with local outlets responsible for the reporting of events on their doorstep. In the absence of geographic markers in the material, this built trust in the authenticity of individual videos over time. Other citizen activist groups ran similarly media operations. Titles of videos and keywords in tweets made content easily searchable; usually containing the name of the neighbourhood,

city and date. Logos of different citizen journalist groups, such as the Aleppo Media Center (AMC), Halab News Network (HNN), Thiqa, and others meant that videos were easy to identify as originating from these users, and ensured that news organisations could trace back the source, providing transparency about the origin of content. One feature of White Helmets videos was the group's members dressed in their distinctive uniform, eliminating doubt about who the footage showed. Accusations of stage managing anti-regime citizen activism have been raised against Syrian diaspora activists, who, equipped with a deep understanding of newsrooms' requirements, act as 'brokers' of citizen activists' content to mainstream news media (Papadopoulos, 2013). Allegations of the spread of propaganda through network journalism also come from criticisms of a disconnect between Western narratives about digital media practices and their local context (al-Ghazzi, 2014). Yet, what these structures show is an awareness of professional routines to reproduce journalistic processes and ease entry into the global news flow.

Only two of the sources in Table 1 were not citizen activists: the Russian Ministry of Defence, and the Syrian state-media outlet Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). However, these sources were cited many more times than shown here but sourced through other means than social media. Nevertheless, citizen activists in rebel-held Aleppo districts were given significant framing power. They were often cited in the lead paragraph or provided the bulk, if not all, the multimedia material in video reports (see Figure 1 and 3). Although the term 'activist' – itself denoting partisanship – was used frequently to describe pro-opposition citizen journalists, this did not hinder their prominence in framing the news text. Below are the first paragraphs of some of the news texts, each citing citizen activists as source, inadvertently turning them into primary definers. In this scenario the secondary definers were physically so far removed from the news event, that their mediation was dominated by citizen activists to the extent that without them it might have been almost impossible to report on events in east Aleppo at all. While Hall et al.'s description of primary and secondary definers puts the latter at a disadvantage, its power was eroded particularly in this scenario since large amounts of the content used to produce the coverage was taken from citizen activists.

Syrian government aircraft have bombed besieged rebel-held eastern districts of the city of Aleppo for the first time in three weeks, activists say. (BBC 2016a)

At least 25 people have died in a third consecutive day of Syrian government airstrikes and shelling on rebel-held parts of Aleppo, activists say. (BBC 2016b)

Syrian government airstrikes and barrel bomb attacks hit residential neighbourhoods of rebel-held east Aleppo on Tuesday for the first time in nearly a month, a monitor said. (France 24 2016a)

All hospitals in Syria's besieged rebel-held eastern Aleppo are out of service after days of heavy air strikes, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said Saturday, while a war monitor said some were still open but too dangerous to reach. (France 24 2016b)

At least 49 people have been killed in heavy government air strikes in the eastern part of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, witnesses and activists say. (Al Jazeera 2016a)

Citizen activists were relied on especially to report the location and types of attacks, and their consequences on the civilian population. The absence of any reporting on the opposition fighters by citizen activists implies a neutral viewpoint held by ordinary residents caught up in the conflict. Unsurprisingly, those users with the least source power were, though active on social media, the warring parties (Table 2). Their overt interest in presenting their side of the story may have meant that they were not deemed suitable apart from exceptional cases, whereas the citizen activists self-presentation as quasi news media outlets fit more easily with journalistic practices.

Both the BBC and France 24 used the term activist more consistently than Al Jazeera. This implied more distancing from these sources. Al Jazeera also had journalists embedded inside east Aleppo suggesting a closer relationship. France 24 most often counterbalanced or complimented activist reports with other sources. But although the term activist was frequently used to describe the source of news content, its meaning was not engaged with in the vast majority of the texts. Therefore activist could have a range of meanings, from pursuing the cause of journalism in a hostile environment to someone advocating a political cause. The lack of transparency about what activism meant in this context shrouded its problematic relationship with journalistic norms. An exception was

one news text by the BBC which interviewed one of its Arabic editors (BBC Outside Source 2016). He described the sectarianism in the conflict and its implications for journalists' access but argued that by reflecting both sides, it was possible to ensure some balance in the coverage. However, such reflection on the sources was not made apparent to audiences in the day-to-day coverage.

### **Qualitative analysis of multimedia news texts on 16 November**

Textual analysis of three news texts published on 16 November across the three news organisations analysed the difference in how the BBC, France 24 and Al Jazeera framed citizen activists. Albeit a limited sample, it aimed to investigate the power-relationship between activists and journalists, and activist and other sources established by the organisations.

In Figure 1, 10 stills from the BBC multimedia report 'Fear in Aleppo as air strikes resume' are displayed. They show the entire written text that was overlaid onto the footage. The images also contain the logos of the media activists that supplied the footage. The first image sets the scene of bombs dropping onto buildings described as located in eastern Aleppo. It was sourced through the Aleppo Media Center (AMC), one of the most popular pro-opposition media activist groups (see Table 1). Text laid over the footage cites Syrian government and army claims they were targeting the depots of rebel fighters. Next the video cuts to AMC multimedia material framing the attacks as targeting civilians both through images and interviews. Footage shows young girls walking through rubble and a short interview with one man wearing a jacket marked with the words 'Syria Charity' – a Paris-based non-profit organisation, according to its website – describing the targeting of 'civilian areas with barrel bombs' and 'medical facilities'.

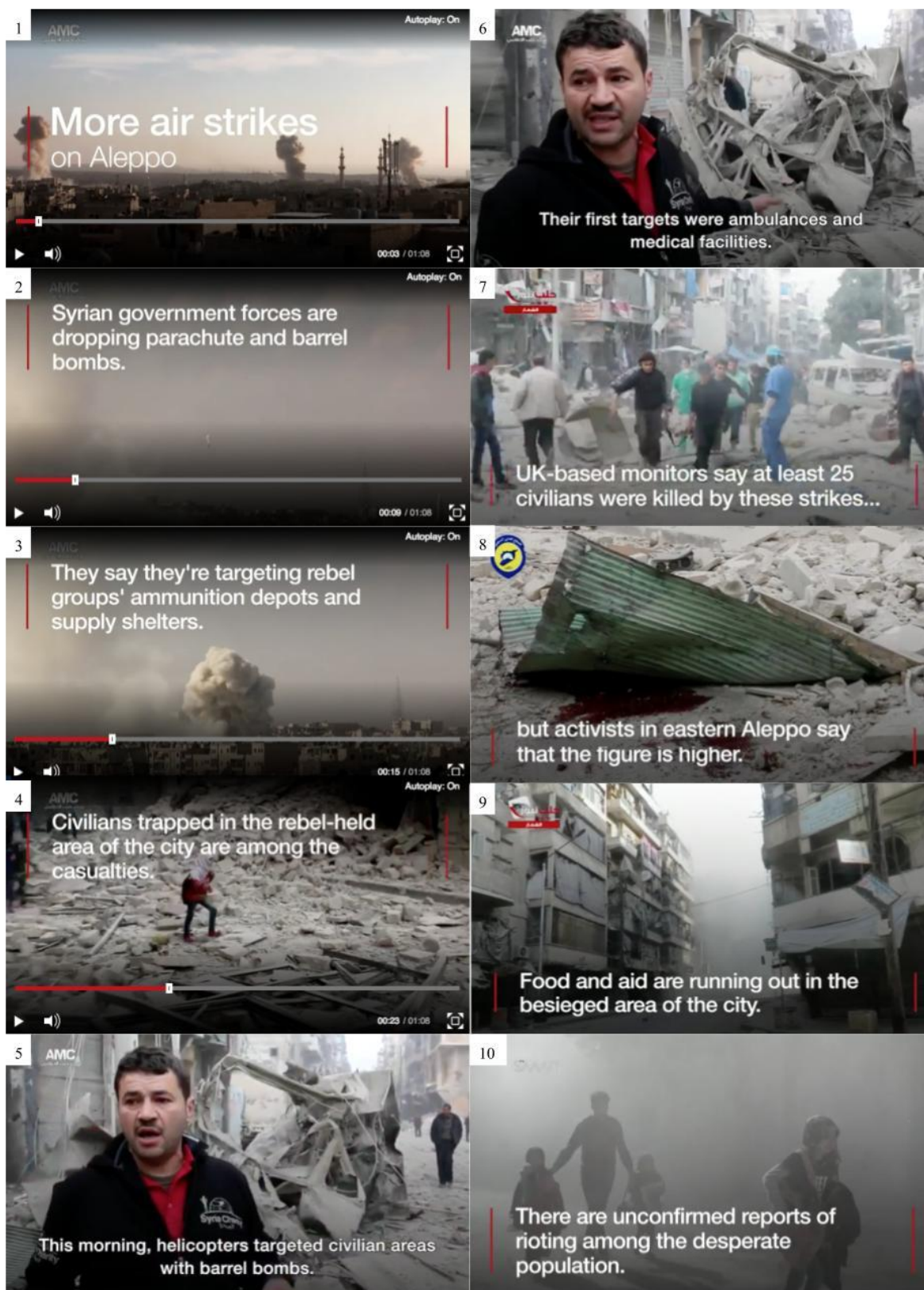


Figure 1. Fear in Aleppo as air strikes resume (BBC 2016c)

Subsequently, the report cites SOHR and other activists. The AMC footage is complimented with further audio-visual material from another three pro-opposition media activist groups: Halab News Network, White Helmets, and SMART. Information provided by Syrian authorities is presented only to be delegitimised in the narrative constructed by citizen-journalists. This narrative goes unquestioned as the entire text is constructed from content produced by media activists. It references SOHR's reported death toll which it compares to figures provided by media activists on the ground. Although little is known about the information gathering techniques by the SOHR its reports are described as conservative. The implication being that the rigorous verification practices carried out by SOHR may play down the true death toll and the BBC is erring on the side of caution. This implies a tier system of trustworthiness, with SOHR framed as the most trustworthy, while other media activists may be less precise but can be relied on for journalistic material nonetheless.

'Russia resumes airstrikes in rebel-held East Aleppo after ceasefire' was a video report published by France 24. In Figure 2 the audio narration is transcribed on the right and descriptions and sourcing of the video material is detailed on the left. France 24 relied on a much broader pool of sources, many of them fitting the literature's description of primary definers, with pro-opposition citizen-journalists as an alternative view that contributed but did not extensively shape the overall narrative.

Video material	Reporter narration
<i>Jets taking off from an aircraft carrier (Source: Russian Defence Ministry, YouTube)</i>	Taking off for battle, Russian carrier jets take off to pound opposition targets in Syria.
<i>Footage of cruise missile being launched from aircraft carrier. (Source: Russian Defence Ministry on social media)</i>	For the first time, Moscow is using its only aircraft carrier in combat alongside cruise missiles from its naval frigate.
<i>Footage of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu briefing Russian President Vladimir Putin. (Source: Media or official Kremlin footage)</i>	<i>Interpreter translation of Shoigu:</i> [...] cruise missiles were launched from the Admiral Grigorovich frigates to hit predetermined targets. Separately Bastion coastal missiles have been launched to hit targets deep into the Syrian territory.



<i>Military aerial footage of strikes on targets. (Source: Russian military)</i>	Russia kept silent about targetting Aleppo saying its offensive was aimed at the Islamic State group and the Al Qaeda
<i>Footage of ground rocket launch. (Source: Unknown)</i>	affiliated al-Nusra front in rebel-held Idlib and Homs provinces. Moscow claims no Russian nor Syrian jet has bombed Aleppo's Old City in the past 28 days.
<i>Video of column of dust rising from buildings. (Source: Aleppo pro-opposition citizen journalist group Thiqa on social media)</i>	Three weeks of relative calm was shattered the same day Russia launched its offensive as dozens of air raids pounded opposition-held eastern Aleppo.
<i>Footage filmed in rubble and dust suggesting recent bombing or shelling of the area. (Source: White Helmets on social media)</i>	Residents of the besieged neighbourhoods believe Moscow's escalation of the violence is just a prelude to a major ground operation. Syrian state TV reported that regime troops were preparing to attack from nine directions.
<i>Footage of tanks rolling down a road. (Source: Unknown)</i> <i>Footage of opposition fighters' tanks and rocket launchers firing. (Source: Jabath Fateh al Sham on social media )</i>	In the last four weeks opposition fighters have rejected repeated Russian offers of humanitarian pause in fighting to leave the city.
<i>Video of rubble-filled roads and bombed out buildings (Source: Pro-opposition citizen journalists AMC on social media)</i>	No aid has entered the area since July. The UN warns that a quarter of a million people trapped in the city's rebel-held east are facing mass starvation.




Figure 2. Russia resumes airstrikes in rebel-held East Aleppo after ceasefire (France 24 2016c)





Compared with the BBC report, pro-opposition citizen journalists' power to frame the narrative was curtailed by France 24 reporters through the inclusion of competing narratives by other sources. A large and leading part of the report was framed by Russian military and government sources, reproducing their frame that presents them as fighting extremists in Syria. The initial 50 seconds of the report – just over half of the total length – shows footage of military hardware, a military briefing and aerial footage of an air strike. The inclusion of




footage by opposition fighters showing the firing of rockets and tanks also put the focus on the conflict between two armed sides. The BBC drew on material by media activists that focused solely on the humanitarian aspect of the conflict, creating a clear aggressor-victim dichotomy that framed activists as the more powerful and credible voice. Moreover, The France 24 report frames the civilian cost not just as the outcome of Syrian regime and Russian military aggression but contextualised it as also resulting from opposition fighters' refusal to accept a ceasefire. On the other hand, the Russian claim that their military is not targeting Aleppo is called into question by the content produced by citizen activists which creates a counter-narrative that disputes these claims. Competing narratives are presented to the news audience throughout the report with the opportunity for different actors to reframe and contest each others' claims. Pro-opposition media activists were able to gain representation in the France 24 report and succeeded in relaying their narrative but they were not dominant in framing the overall news text. As such, citizen activists were not stepping into the role of the journalist, producing the news text with their content, but were treated primarily as sources. The power to contextualise and select the different sources and material comprising the news text remained far more evidently in the hands of the professional journalists. The wide selection of sources to counterbalance one another also implies the lack of impartiality by each actor that requires representation of different sources to produce a more notionally balanced news text. By contrast the BBC news text saw responsibility for reporting on events abdicated to media activists to the point that it incorporated an interview staged by them.

The Al Jazeera video report gave significant framing power to pro-opposition citizen activists. Figure 3 breaks down the audio narration on the right and stills from the video material on the left with information about its sourcing detailed beneath them. As seen in the BBC video report, citizen-journalists were dominant in the framing of the news text but unlike in the BBC news text, their message was largely mediated through the narration of an Al Jazeera journalist. Although BBC journalists selected the material and reports for their news text, in many ways this content was left to speak for itself appearing to show a low level of mediation by professional journalists. By comparison, the narration in the Al Jazeera news text appears as a mediation, albeit sympathetic, of the citizen activists' framing. Moreover, the blurring of the logos identifying the source of

the activist material used implies a sense of ownership and responsibility for this material by Al Jazeera. Blurring the line separating their own content from that of pro-opposition citizen-journalists it is more deeply integrated into the Al Jazeera coverage with the narration reporting the claims and reports of citizen-journalists as their own without attribution.

Video material	Reporter Narration
 <p>(Source: White Helmets)</p>	<p>There's panic on the streets of Aleppo. Places like Al-Ferdous neighbourhood are few areas where rescuers can still reach</p>
 <p>(Source: White Helmets)</p>	<p>Scores of people have been wounded in the latest round of attacks.</p>
 <p>(Source: White Helmets)</p>	<p>These are some of the most intense air strikes by the Assad government's jets in three weeks.</p>

	<p>Elsewhere in the city, when the suffocating dust and smoke settled, the destruction became clear.</p>
	<p>This is the Haderiya neighbourhood. One of the nine areas which came under attack in the besieged city of Aleppo.</p>
	<p>This man in the Hanano neighbourhood says barrel bombs targetted this area. He tried to save a little girl here but she died.</p>
	<p>Suheil al-Hassan is an important leader of the Assad military. His troops say they're ready to take the city of Aleppo.</p>

 <p>(Source: Al Jazeera)</p>	<p>We spoke to one of the rescuers who was unable to go and help others.</p> <p><i>Al Jazeera reporter: 'Ismael tell me where you are and what is happening around you.'</i></p>
 <p>(Source: Al Jazeera)</p>	<p><i>White Helmets spokesman Ismail Alabdullah: 'What's happened, just around 12 o'clock, there was a huge wave of bombing which started on Aleppo city targetting many neighbourhoods, actually all the neighbourhoods. I was trapped in my apartment until now, and maybe in a few minutes I will try to go there'</i></p>
 <p>(Source: Syrian state TV but originating from Russian Ministry of Defence)</p>	<p>The attacks in Aleppo were timed with Russian strikes on Idlib and Homs. Pro-government TV uploaded this video, which it says was shot just before the Russian aircraft carrier Kuznetsov was used for the first time. Russia's defence ministry says it will be targetting [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant] positions and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, a group formerly known as al-Nusra Front. Many see this as Russian muscle flexing of its military might.</p>



 <p>(Source: Unknown)</p>	<p>Since last year, the military support for the Assad government has turned the tide and reversed opposition gains.</p>
 <p>(Source: Al Jazeera)</p>	<p><i>Reporter:</i> ‘Rebels say they are being attacked by Syrian, Russian, Iranian and Lebanese forces. People in the city of Aleppo say they knew these attacks were coming but could do little to prepare and as world leaders have failed to provide a solution the people of Syria continue to suffer.’</p>

Figure 3. ‘Syria war: Aleppo pounded by air strikes as pause ends’ (Al Jazeera 2016b)

For the first 38 seconds (of 2 minutes and 5 seconds), video material is largely provided by the White Helmets, while reports by its members’ and other pro-opposition citizen-journalists’ are cited throughout without attribution. The Al Jazeera journalist seen in the footage is located across the border in the Turkish city of Gaziantep. Mediated through the journalist’s voice it conveys a sense of objectivity. In fact, the news text illustrates citizen-journalists becoming primary definers as they provide the majority of the information, while also merging with secondary definers – meaning the news media – as the reporters themselves. Al Jazeera’s news text is the starkest example of the breakdown of a separation between citizen-journalists and professional journalism as the two are not only in a symbiotic relationship with one another but the division becomes all but invisible.

## Conclusion

Holzschleiter (2005) differentiates between power *in* discourse and power *over* discourse. In this study, power in the discourse of the news event was often held by activists. This also largely held true of the power over the discourse as

activists were almost the only sources who were able to report from inside east Aleppo. If the news organisations covered the events in east Aleppo, they had to relinquish much journalistic control to activists, who provided a large extent of the material that comprised the news coverage. However, power in the discourse of professional journalism in collaborative news production was dominated by the news organisation, and this was achieved through the admission of citizen journalists who were perceived to carry out acts of journalism according to professional norms. Therefore, the hierarchy of the concept of professionalism over amateurism was maintained through the legitimising of citizen journalists through professional norms.

Citizen activists oftentimes took on the role of reporters in the coverage of the battle for Aleppo and were required to appear to adopt journalistic norms, such as impartiality (Yousuf and Taylor 2016), as well as a level of transparency around the origins of their news content (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013). Although they were frequently described as ‘activists’, there was little discussion of what this term meant and especially in the BBC and Al Jazeera coverage was no barrier to heavily influencing the news narrative. As such citizen activists were very powerful not just as primary definers but also secondary definers as they were able to select what information and sources inside east Aleppo were given coverage. For example, they often gave prominence to images of the civilian cost of the conflict, while giving little insight into the military activity of the opposition fighters.

While the news organisations acted as secondary definers by providing access to the global news flow, media activists already possessed this access through social media alone. News organisations, in fact, had very little power to mediate these messages. The extensive use of news content produced by media activists and the legitimising of this content through the discourse of professional journalism meant they took on more than a simple primary definer role. In a collaborative news environment such as this, the news production by professional journalists could not be isolated from that of the citizen activist. While steps were taken to make news content accessible and valuable to mainstream news media the personal motivations, connections, circumstances and sources of citizen activists usually remained opaque. This differs from traditional ideas of primary definers such as ruling politicians. Primary definers, with the exception of the ‘expert’, are

not deferred to for their perceived adoption of journalistic ethics and values. Whereas the Syrian regime, its state-controlled media and the Russian government were framed as biased with narratives that could be contested by others, the framing of citizen-activists' content as providing impartial and authentic reports framed them not only as more valuable sources but also as fellow journalists.

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